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Epiphany 6 Series A 2017

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Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, Feb 16

A friend of mine grew up in the back woods of Minnesota, and had known how to use a gun from the time he was a young boy. He was born and raised in the days of the draft and when he was graduated from high school he got the letter from the government telling him when and where to report for duty. His was that fortunate moment after the Korean conflict and before the Vietnam War ramped up and so he spent his entire time of service stateside.

Stationed at some huge army base far from home, he was entered into the “sharpshooting” competition the commander instituted to promote the military arts. My friend won, not only his unit, but he was the best of the whole base. His reward was to have an award given him by the base commander, a General. Just before the award ceremony, which was to take place in some massive assembly, his sergeant pulled him aside and said, “Private, don’t fall on your ass up there!”

You have to imagine this, he was a nineteen year old pietistic Norwegian kid from the back woods of Minnesota, he had gone through basic training and had drilled into him that sergeants were to be obeyed without question; officers were closer to deity than even that. Now he would have to salute a full general, in front of thousands of soldiers, officers, and staff, and answer his questions. All he remembers of that moment was how terrified he was when he walked up those steps onto that podium.

The texts today remind me of that story. The general, shall we say the god-like figure, in the story I told, most likely really wanted my friend to succeed, wanted him to do well, and indeed was delighted that this young man was there. He was there to reward this young soldier who had done well. But this was utterly lost on the young man. He was simply terrified to be in the presence of the general.

Moses will be a little like that sergeant in the story of my friend. He will tell us not to mess up. Because we can mess up. He had rescued these people from slavery, led them through a period of purification and education for forty years, but there were no guarantees that they would listen or continue in the good start he had given them. Indeed, if you read the Deuteronomic history, you know that they did not.

Paul compares his audience to children, infantile Christians who need milk not the crusty bread and protein laden meat of the mature diet. They did not have the teeth to chew.

And Jesus, what will say about Jesus’ words today. He takes the very Torah of God, the instructions which the people did not follow and he internalizes it terribly. The disobedience of the ancient Israelites isn’t half the problem. The internal disobedience of us all is even greater. Now not only am I judged for the actions which I do, but also for the feelings which are in my heart, the thoughts which flit across my mind, as if I could change any of them.

It is no wonder that a Christian who reads and takes seriously what these texts say might not want to meet God. Like that young soldier might be terrified to meet the one before whom even the general must bow, the King of all.

But such a Christian forgets that the general in the story wanted to smile upon that young soldier, he wanted to bless him. Our task as preachers today, when confronted with so much and heavy law, is to let our people see the smiling face of God. They will not have a hard time seeing the law; although, we need to let it do its job. But what we cannot fail to do is let them see that God really is glad that they are there, despite their failures and despite their brokenness. If we fail in that regard we are no longer preachers of the Gospel, preachers of the good news. And it is only the good news which actually does anything in their lives. No amount of law will accomplish the salvation they so desperately need.

Collect of the Day

O Lord, graciously hear the prayers of Your people that we who justly suffer the consequences of our sin may be mercifully delivered by your goodness to the glory of Your name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

We have regularly pointed out that these prayers often have a different mindset than the larger culture. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than it is in this prayer. The phrase “we who justly suffer” is simply not in the vocabulary of most Americans. If anything, suffering is an occasion to get a bit of fame, to be noticed by someone who will preferably have deep pockets and give us something for our trouble. Several high profile incidents in Oregon over the past several years have highlighted individuals who have faked some terrible event to benefit from suffering. Suffering is time to call an attorney and make someone pay, if they won’t do it out of sympathy. Suffering is so unjust, that it is, at least in Oregon, occasion when we can legally procure enough barbiturates to end our own lives with the blessing of the state.

We who suffer justly – behind that phrase is an assumption which we need to address. There is justice, and suffering can be a just result, a proper result. There is a name for this idea: Retributive Justice. Retributive justice suggests that for sin there should be a commensurate punishment. At the end of The Horse and His Boy by C. S. Lewis, the main characters are chased by a lion and one of them, Aravis, is clawed by the lion, leaving deep and painful gashes on her back. Later in the story when the other character, Cor/Shasta is wondering about that lion, Aslan admits that he is the lion. He says that Aravis received one scratch for every lash that her servant received when she covered up for her mistress’ flight from her family. Aravis had done something wrong, her servant had been punished, and Aslan had balanced the scales with a literal version of the Lex Talionis.

Lewis also has an interesting exploration of retributive justice in That Hideous Strength. The forces of evil in that book are pushing “rehabilitation” instead of “retributive justice.” But while

rehabilitation sounds so much better, it was actually much worse. The husband of one woman was kept in prison indefinitely because even though his sentence was complete he was deemed “unrehabilitated” and thus it was extended. Lewis points out that retributive justice may in fact be a way of limiting punishment.

But perhaps we don’t buy the idea of retributive justice. Why then is there suffering? C. S. Lewis would be so convinced of the idea that, even though a protestant, he would actually float the idea that purgatory was a logical and perhaps possible idea for him. His sense of retributive justice meant that we did have some just suffering to undergo after death and before we were “fit” for heaven’s peace and perfection. I am not quite ready to go that far down that road, but then I still need to ask the question of suffering.

The prayer suggests that suffering is just. In what way is it just to suffer or conversely unjust not to suffer? One could suggest consequence as the mechanism here. If I stick my paper clip in the electrical socket to see what will happen, I will suffer, and it will not really be a punishment as much as it is simply a consequence of my rash behavior. Is that what we mean by justice? Is it simply that when you do something stupid, sometimes it will hurt?

This question actually is worth asking today as we come to these lessons. Moses will set before his people a stark choice, life or death. It would seem nonsense to choose death, yet we do. Is therefore death simply the consequence of our own stupidity? Does that really explain our entrapment in the grave? Jesus will speak of the man who hates his brother subject to the same judgment as the fellow who takes up a knife and stabs his brother. What happened to justice there?

The preacher will want to think carefully about these things. The answer which does not take seriously the mystery and the holiness of this whole affair may well miss the fact that Jesus suffered, justly and unjustly, in the same cross. My sins demanded suffering, so in bearing them he justly suffered. Yet, they were not his sins, so his suffering was intensely unjust. What exactly does that mean?

Three years ago this also led us to a discussion of prayer. When we pray, do we pray for God’s rescue to come to us so that we may glorify Jesus’ name? Do I pray for healing and put a period at the end of that sentence? Or do we pray for healing so that we may tell others about the goodness of God? It seems like an odd question, but why do we want the suffering to end? Is it purely for our own comfort? Really?

We wondered how we can talk to folks who are praying desperately for peace or help, but they don’t seem to see it, especially in the face of suffering on the part of so many folk in other troubled places in the world. In Mexico the drug leaders are slaughtering young people who are not actually involved in the drug trade. In Nicaragua a Christian church gathered to a mass baptism at the sea, and some wave or something overcame them and they died. It seems so

unjust. How could such a thing happen at a baptism? Are they justly suffering the consequences of their sins? The old problem of evil and a good God seems to be at work here.

We thought carefully about the way that we do pray. We wondered if when we pray are we letting God off the hook. Do we only ask for what we think can be or do we keep praying for the “impossible” understanding that nothing is impossible for God? What do we do in the face of profound disappointment when our prayers do not seem to be answered? The prayer suggests that this might be our fault. Is it? When we tell people that no is another answer, are we just telling them that they have messed up?

This is especially hard when we serve a community which is rocked by a tragedy. When a child dies, when a bridge collapses, or when some random act of death and suffering visits God did not make this happen.

Lou Bauer’s former congregation had one little girl that was somewhat developmentally delayed and had some profound health problems. For the last three weeks she had been talking about how “Jesus was coming soon.” And he did. A couple of Friday’s ago, her parents walked into her room to wake her and found that Jesus had carried her home. In the final weeks of her life, Jesus was making her into a great light for that congregation.

Readings

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

¹⁵ “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, ²⁰ loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.”

Per our earlier discussion, we might ask whether when bad things happen to folks it is because they have chosen “death and evil?” Does this passage necessitate or even allow that sort of an interpretation? If it doesn’t how do we get around that?

If you want to really complicate this, start working the whole abortion debate into this discussion. We might march to “choose life” and on the other side are folks who are “pro-choice.” This language may also be sitting underneath this discussion in ways which affect the way we talk about this. The remorseful woman who is struggling with guilt and who hears this

passage, may come to the conclusion that every bad thing that has ever happened to her as after her abortion is a result of her sin. We surely don't want to leave this woman in that guilt. How do we proclaim Christ's forgiveness in this situation?

Here perhaps some history is necessary. The Israelites even in Moses' own lifetime had chosen the wrong way again and again. If you run this in a hard and fast economy of God's favor based upon our actions, the Israelites should never have survived the Golden Calf incident in Exodus. Is this then Moses really warning them that their decisions, even when God still loves you, those decisions have consequences. If I elect to drink and drive, I have not caused God not to love me, but I may still have to face a judge, I might be a parapalegic because I was in an accident, or worse, someone else might be. My choices, according to Moses, do have consequences. But do we need to be very careful here to remember that one of the consequences of our decisions is not that God stops loving us. Indeed, we have to completely remove the love of God from the economy of these decisions.

I can forgive the poor man who suffers the consequences of drunk driving, but he still has to live with the consequences. He might go to jail a forgiven man. He might even go to execution as a forgiven man. I have a tendency to lay my sins at the foot of the cross and then snatch them up again on the way out the door. I may well have to remember this sin "red with the blood of Christ" I won't ever really forget it. All I can do is remember it reddened with his blood.

So what do we do with the decision language which Moses uses and which we as Lutherans in an American context find very uncomfortable. These words of Moses are echoed again by Joshua when he says that he and his house will follow the Lord. It shows up regularly in the Bible.

We need to return to the discussion we have had before, if for no other reason than we admit we have not ever finally arrived at truth as an answer, only gotten closer to Him who is the Truth. Lutherans have an almost automatic reaction to discussions which involve decision for God. When our Baptist or Evangelical friends talk this way, we roll our eyes and mutter something about defective theology. Alas, today it is Moses talking this way and we are reading these words in our Bible. What will we do with this, if we really are a Sola Scriptura church as we claim to be?

I suppose we could just ask a person with poor vocal projection to be the reader today and preach on the Gospel lesson, but such manipulation is beneath us, is it not?

Moses clearly sets a choice before his people, life or death, and he urges them to choose life? Do we assert our theology in such a way that we deny that this was genuinely a choice? (Do we really need to say here: Of course we know that they could not actually choose life – that was a gift after all and their only real choice was to chose death....?) When my Evangelical friends play those sorts of games with the text, as in the words of institution, I usually call them to task for it. I don't want to hear their rationalizations about what "is" means when Jesus says this is his body and blood.

What then shall we do with this text which seems to suggest that at some level people have a choice about whether they will serve God, whether they will choose life or death, good or evil? My Lutheran Confessions, especially the Formula, and certainly my seminary education seemed to ingrain in me the idea that decision theology was by definition bad theology. So what is one to do?

I would here recommend reading your confessions. Try this section right here from the Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article II. This is the opening paragraph which outlines the question at hand:

Since the will of man is found in four unlike states, namely: 1. before the Fall; 2. since the Fall; 3. after regeneration; 4. after the resurrection of the body, the chief question is only concerning the will and ability of man in the second state, namely, what powers in spiritual things he has of himself after the fall of our first parents and before regeneration, and whether he is able by his own powers, prior to and before his regeneration by God's Spirit, to dispose and prepare himself for God's grace, and to accept [and apprehend], or not, the grace offered through the Holy Ghost in the Word and holy [divinely instituted] Sacraments.

It would seem to me that this is really helpful here. The confessional discussion about free will only pertains to the second state, the fallen human being who is not regenerate or in a state of faith, for regeneration is the fruit of that relationship with God by which we are saved.

To whom is Moses talking here? Is it not at the very end of the Exodus event, just before he dies, and just before they enter the Promised Land? Has not Moses led them for forty years through the wilderness, while the wicked and faithless generation which had rejected the counsel of Joshua and Caleb died? This is not a choice made from some position of neutrality in which the deciding individual will either believe or not believe. These people have been following God for forty years! If there ever was a congregation of people in the process of regeneration, this was it!

Too often we have allowed the Evangelical to determine our conversations by his error. It is true, our Confessions assert, the fallen and unregenerate man is incapable of making the decision to follow Christ, give one's heart to him, or otherwise accept Jesus. But it is equally true and confessionally appropriate to urge and exhort the regenerate human being, the one who has experienced the water of baptism, to decide to do the right thing, to do the thing which flows out of the life which Christ has given him/her and not to embrace the death which flows out of that old man who clings so tightly to us. If we deny that choice, we deny substantial portions of the letters of Paul! (I am thinking of Galatians 5-6, Eph 3ff, much of Philippians, II Cor 8-9, and much of the later part of Romans.)

Of course our task is complicated by the fact that many of those who are in the world around us believe that they can find a neutral place to stand where they can make a decision about whether to be a Christian or not. This is why many deluded parents elect "not to force religion" down the

throats of their children; rather, they would “let them make up their own mind.” Never mind that such thinking is nonsense when it comes to bathing, brushing teeth, eating vegetables, or getting homework done. What sort of parent would allow a child to decide whether he/she needs a bath or would allow them to brush teeth only when they feel like it? We would probably suggest such a parent is in need of some basic skills.

The fundamental mistake in such thinking is to imagine that we can create a theologically neutral place on which to make such a decision. We cannot. If we say that we will not baptize or bring our children to church and therefore allow our children to make a choice, we have already taught them something, namely that faith is not nearly so important as the dental hygiene which I will force on the next generation. It is true, flossing and brushing are often met with complaints from my youngest son. But I know that if I leave it up to him, he will have a mouth full of cavities by the time he is 25 and my dentist will have a boat somewhere that he has named after my son.

But we are not talking to unregenerate human beings. We are talking to the folks who have been washed in the waters of baptism. We are talking to folks who have been touched by the Spirit of God and that Spirit has called forth a new man or woman who really does have in mind the things of God. Yes, the old man clings tightly, that is why they need us to preach and encourage and exhort them to the life to which God has already called them and in which he has already created them.

To return to the confessions, here is the sound doctrine (that is actually the term used here) which is confessed in Article IV of the Epitome:

3. We believe, teach, and confess also that all men, but those especially who are born again and renewed by the Holy Ghost, are bound to do good works.
4. In this sense the words necessary, shall, and must are employed correctly and in a Christian manner also with respect to the regenerate, and in no way are contrary to the form of sound words and speech.
5. Nevertheless, by the words mentioned, necessitas, necessarium, necessity and necessary, if they be employed concerning the regenerate, not coercion, but only due obedience is to be understood, which the truly believing, so far as they are regenerate, render not from coercion or the driving of the Law, but from a voluntary spirit; because they are no more under the Law, but under grace, Rom. 6:14; 7:6; 8:14.
6. Accordingly, we also believe, teach, and confess that when it is said: The regenerate do good works from a free spirit, this is not to be understood as though it is at the option of the regenerate man to do or to forbear doing good when he wishes, and that he can nevertheless retain faith if he intentionally perseveres in sins.

Especially notice paragraph 3 and 6. Good works are necessary, and they are a matter of life and death. Moses was not kidding. What is more, it is quite appropriate, according to paragraph 4 that doing good works is called a necessary thing. But paragraph 5 also needs to be kept in mind. The necessity is not that God would love us on this account, but that to do otherwise is to deny such love. The regenerate human does this from “a voluntary spirit.” Can we keep all that straight this Sunday?

So what would we preach? The decisions our people make, the decisions to have devotions with our family, the decision to go to church, the decision to speak charitably about our neighbor, or the decision to sleep in on Sunday, those are all real decisions. The person who has never heard of God's love, he is not making a decision there. He or she is simply walking in the road that he/she knows. We have a decision, a real decision. We drown the old man in our baptism, daily, because he is a good swimmer. But that is a decision Luther enjoins upon us as we wake every morning and take a shower. As a Christian I can just stand under that water and wash the dirt of this life away, or I can also stand under that water and decide that it is the old man who is going down the drain, the old man who is drowning, and the new man or woman who is stepping out of that bath and into this day. That is a real choice we make. It is only possible because God has made it possible, but it is a real thing. The preacher is not a confessional preacher who does not preach that theological decision.

Psalm 119:1-8

Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
 who walk in the law of the LORD!
² Blessed are those who keep his testimonies,
 who seek him with their whole heart,
³ who also do no wrong,
 but walk in his ways!
⁴ You have commanded your precepts
 to be kept diligently.
⁵ Oh that my ways may be steadfast
 in keeping your statutes!
⁶ Then I shall not be put to shame,
 having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.
⁷ I will praise you with an upright heart,
 when I learn your righteous rules.
⁸ I will keep your statutes;
 do not utterly forsake me!

Again the psalmist articulates for us the emotive state of the man or woman who has heard the Gospel, the sermon, partaken of the sacrament, and been blessed in this place. The psalm is not

an exhortation to the sinner to clean up his ways, but a description of the new man whom God has raised from the waters of baptism.

I Corinthians 3:1-9

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³ for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? ⁴ For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?

⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

You may want to read the material under the Old Testament lesson if you have not yet done so. Paul says that he could not address them as Spiritual people. Does he mean that in the sense that quotes from the Epitome of the FC mean regenerate? Does he mean that they were in that second category which the Concordists mention in the first quote above?

I am not sure that I would say that. They are child-like, but they are not without faith. They simply have been petulantly choosing death instead of life. We sometimes imagine that the choice of death is a one time and final thing we do. But it is often a process. Sheep get lost one blade of grass at a time. They wander off, rarely do they careen headlong into the jaws of the lion. Paul will have to get rather severe with them, making a painful visit, writing a harsh letter, but he does not completely treat them as though this is a second conversion attempt. The regenerate man in Corinth is infantile in his estimation, but not gone. He is calling to turn around and walk the other way, but they still can make that choice.

Paul seems to be riffing on the parable of the seed that grows automatically in Mark 4. There we read of a farmer who sows but has no clue how the whole process happens, but he simply observes that first a seed is sown, then it sprouts, then finally the harvest is ready. The farmer sleeps and wakes, but he does not make this happen. When Mark told that story he seemed to be speaking to people who had lost confidence in the efficacy of the word.

For the congregation in Corinth and for us as well, Paul is pointing out a very simple and obvious truth, which needs to build on the truth of what we said last week. (Remember the forgiveness thing?) This is not Paul's Church, it is not Apollos' church, and it is not yours and it is not the congregation's church. It is always God's Church, created in the blood of Christ, empowered and called into being through the outpouring of His Holy Spirit.

The church in Corinth had been divided by conflicts, a partisan spirit which caused them to see each other through a lens of "friend or enemy." But all this was rooted in an inappropriate

ownership of the Church. It was “mine” or it was “Paul’s” message and Paul’s church. Paul will have none of this. It has always been and will always remain Christ’s church.

As preachers we have to hear this as especially addressed to us. We often use the convention of speaking about “my” congregation. I don’t think we mean to, but the words actually are leading one to the idea that this congregation is inappropriately “mine” in the same way that the Honda minivan in the garage is mine and not yours and I am rather crabby if you point out that my oil needs to be changed or there is a scuff on the back fender. In faith I can finally admit that it is not even my car, but all things belong to the Lord. But it is really not my congregation. To own such an assemblage will result in all sorts of mischief, including the divisions and immorality which Paul found in Corinth.

This issue of ownership is critical to the many conflicts we see. When I try to own the church, the person who has another idea is an enemy. They are exerting control over what is mine. No wonder we get into conflict. But when Christ owns the Church and sets its agenda, our conversations and disagreements become over tactics and not goals. He sets the goals, we can only discuss tactics. While this does not eliminate all friction, it does help. We are all immediately cast on the same side, his side. We may have a disagreement over the best way to accomplish His goals, but we are all working for the same goals. That unity is an opportunity to transcend the division. This seems to be what Paul has in mind in Corinth.

But Paul has more than simply a good idea for overcoming conflict here. Not only is it Christ’s church, but he is actively at work within it, He is giving the growth, he is the mysterious power behind the seed’s transformation from a dead looking thing buried in the ground to the plant. Paul sows, Apollos waters, but God gives growth. Herein lies hope. The fact of the matter is that good advice and boundaries have never kept me very well. I always manage to find some way to stumble and fall, even under the best constitution and bylaws, even with the perfect sort of a structure. If we all could manage to rid ourselves of inappropriate ownership of our congregations, we would still find some way to mess this up. Hope lies in the fact that God is at work in this.

Some possible Sermon ideas here:

- 1. God gives the growth and helps us grow up*
- 2. We are fellow workers with God. God participates in our lives. He does not take away the humanity, making us into less than humans, but his participation in our lives makes us more than humans and lets us be fully human at the same time.*
- 3. Cooperation – Paul and Apollos are not in competition. They are not jealous of one another. They are all serving and united in Christ. Their factionalism is a sign of their infancy, their immaturity and their need for the spiritual milk and inability to handle the spiritual meat. Being ready for the meaty fare means that we are not in that competitive and combative relationship with one another.*

We thought the Leonard Read's old essay "I Pencil" would be a good read in preparation for this. A google search will turn it up.

Matthew 5:21-37

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

³¹ "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' ³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.

This is a necessary but difficult section of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. If you have taken a solemn vow to preach these Gospel lessons, don't dump the whole load this week. This is a moment to practice a measure of restraint. It will reach a terrifying crescendo next week as Jesus exhorts us "to be perfect as our father in heaven is perfect." Notice he doesn't say, "Try real hard" or "Become perfect" or "make progress" or even, "Be better than 50% of the rest of humanity." He says be perfect.

This reading is in one sense a prelude, a warm up to that one.

In these verses of Matthew Jesus is radically redefining the Torah for his contemporaries. They thought they understood the Torah of God. They had fenced it in with over six hundred ancillary rules. Work was forbidden on the Sabbath, hence there was a rule which dictated that walking so

many steps was work, less than that was not work, a stroll which was permitted on the Sabbath. This process would continue. In many Orthodox and observant communities, it is breaking the Sabbath to push an elevator button. Hence Israeli hotels usually have a Sabbath elevator which constantly ascends and descends, stopping at every floor, lest you be required to push a button.

Jesus takes it from such externals and internalizes the Torah. It is all about where your heart is in this. And this is a terrible thing to do to us. I can, through discipline, accountability, and hard work break a habit, conform behavior to an outward form. But my heart? My thoughts? I may be able to do some exercises and gain some control over my thoughts, although always incomplete, but the feelings?

God demands an emotional set that is in complete harmony with himself.

Jesus is crushing us here. The murderer and the man who calls his brother a fool are exactly the same – people for whom he has come to die. The serial polygamist and the faithful husband whose eye gets caught by the billboard or the beer commercial are the same, sinners for whom Jesus died. The idea of making distinctions in this regard only makes sense to the legalist and the lover of the rules. It makes no sense to God. He loves them both, he died for them both, they are both forgiven in Christ. Are they not unified in the most important things? Their humanity, their death is just as human and just as dead as anyone else's.

The idea that this sermon was given to us in order to make us better people needs to be addressed. The Amish make these verses the very central part of their faith. This is why you will never serve on a jury with an Amish farmer. He won't take an oath, because Jesus said not to do that. They won't let TV's into their homes, they are a temptation to lust and covetousness. There is something admirable in that sort of a sacrifice. At least they are trying. Too often I have simply given up, caved in to the passions and brokenness which dwells in my heart. At least they are fighting it.

But did Jesus really speak these words for this purpose? Yes, he does want us to amend our sinful lives. He means that. And it may well be that this is the message we really need to hear today. But when we try that and we come to realization that it does not work, when we break ourselves on the rocks of penitence again and again, there is something else he wants to say.

The Sermon on the Mount does not describe me very well. In fact, Jesus seems to indict me for my failures here, and grind them in. But all the while his perfect law is perfectly describing Jesus. He did not come to abolish the law and prophets, but to fulfill them. And he did, and then he took that perfect obedience which only was his, and he gave it to me.

So, in a very real sense, these words of Jesus absolutely describe me. The standard which he establishes is not only true in its absolute sense, it is truly a description of the new life he has given me. I like to think of this as also a description of what you will see of me when you look at me in heaven. Then this old sinful man will be put to death once and for all and all that will

remain is the new man whom Jesus will raise to eternal life, the new man to whom he first gave life on the day when I was baptized.

Law and Gospel

1. Real decisions rest on my shoulders. Moses implores me to decide and I can make the wrong one! These are real decisions, and they have real consequences. Which is why I really need God's help here. The Gospel is that he has given it. The children of Israel did not make the right choices but God patiently and repeatedly called them back through judges, prophets, kings, and finally an exile.
2. My fallen human nature means that I am singularly ill equipped to make good decisions or do good things. I am prone to claiming what is not mine. I am likely to hate and lust and speak much more than I should. But God is interested in me, and not just my obedience. He has sent His Son and His gentle Spirit to give me real renewal. While Moses and Jesus speak of people who get it wrong and get it right, God assures me that he is working toward my good and right.
3. But Jesus words seem like such an indictment of my sin. I cannot control my thoughts and feelings. I cannot even control my tongue and deeds very well. If you could see all the junk in my heart and mind you might just lock me up. But Jesus offers this up not only as an indictment of my sin but also a description of my cure, the righteousness which he has given us in Christ and to which he is drawing us even now.
4. My failures have wrought terrible effects in my life and my congregation. We fight and strive with one another, we are distracted from the things that give us joy and we end up seeing our church as a place of sadness, drudgery, and discouragement. But Jesus claims the church nonetheless, and in claiming it he removes from us the burden of these things which weigh us down. And with that burden removed, we are able to serve the better. We have joy.

Sermon Ideas

1. Is that really me? (Gospel Lesson – that God would cause the hearer to believe that Jesus really is describing him/her with these words, both in the indictment of sin and in the perfect, imputed righteousness which belongs to all the baptized children of God.)

I heard a really excellent discussion of this with some students around Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. In this play a guy elects to play by the letter of the law and it eventually kills him even though he thinks he is in the right. But the letter of the law slays him. Likewise we will need to come to this from a perspective of mercy (remember the collect.)

This sermon will use the ever useful technique of running through a text twice, the first time as though this was an indictment of our sins, which of course it is. We also thought that since Jesus is really re-interpreting the commandments, it might be good to use the Ten Commandments, or one of them, as the guide for this message. The second run through the text, however, will be as though this were a description of Christ and the righteousness which he lived and which he gave to each of us in our baptism. This second will be the description of what we will be like in heaven, free from anger, free from lust, free from divorce and deceit.

The distance between those two realities, the reality of my sin today and the perfection which I will be in heaven creates a tension or polarity. If left to its own devices, this can simply result in despair. I will never get to that perfect state, but this is where the Gospel comes in. Jesus is responsible for this. He wants to start today, he empowers your repentance and renewal today, but he never gives up that responsibility. The good work which he began in your baptism he will bring to completion on that last day (Phil 1:6).

The preacher will have to proclaim that work of Christ or this sermon might be a disaster for the hearer. Despair is the belief that my problems are bigger than God's solutions. It is really a form of pride in that sense. But it is a particularly destructive form of pride. We are here to give the hearer hope – the distance is great, you can see and feel that. But God's great love for you in Christ is greater than the problem, greater than the distance. He has come to you today in this sacrament, in this word, so that he can draw you closer to the description he makes today.

This sermon will proclaim best when it notices that in Baptism Jesus has identified with the sinner. Now the description which applies to Jesus by right, is graciously given to us. These words do describe us!

We had a wonderful and fruitful discussion here. We love to notice how some sins are bigger than others. What if I am choosing to marry a divorced woman? Is that somehow worse than the guy who is tempted by the billboard? We imagine that willfully doing so is terrible, but Jesus calls them both an adulterer, he paints with a very broad brush. The reality is that Jesus is driving all of us to the comfort of his cross. We all can say that the plan A for God's kingdom would be that marriages be life-long arrangements in which husbands faithfully love a wife and wives faithfully love their husband, but we also know that his not always the case. The divorcee who marries is living every day with the brokenness of that reality. But that does not mean God cannot bless them in plan B. Yes, it is a sin to be divorced and remarried. But so is it a sin to be married once and not avert your eyes from the beer commercials on Monday night football. Jesus calls them both the same problem. Both guys need Jesus.

2. Christ's Church ([Alternate title: God Grows his Church](#)) (Epistle – That Christ would assert his ownership of this Congregation and thereby free the members of this parish from one great cause for the malady of conflict and strife)

Paul asserts that God makes the church grow, that is because it belongs to him, it is his responsibility. Paul as a preacher sowed. Apollos as a minister in their midst watered. But God gave the growth.

Congregations in conflict often are facing a crisis of some sort. The revenues are down, the membership is shrinking, we cannot find Sunday School teachers, and the roof has sprung a leak. We begin to take ownership for these problems and we start to see them as things we need to fix. They are real problems, and we might feel them acutely, especially if your salary is hanging on that revenue.

Even if your congregation is not divided by conflict, this is important and really needs to be heard. We often take credit that belongs to God. I am an instrument through which God works, my service, my vocation, my calling in the kingdom is an opportunity for God to do his work. I don't do the real work!

But hope is to be found not in any solution I propose, in some new idea I have, in the course correction which I will implement, but hope is to be found in Christ. There is a mystery in Church, and that mystery is Christ. It is his body. Paul will develop that idea extensively later in this letter to the Corinthians. He provides and empowers the growth. He will be the one who makes this or that succeed or fail, not our ingenuity, not the rectitude of our ideas or theology. He will get this done.

For the congregation in conflict over its direction and in the face of crisis, the real need is not my idea or yours, but the real need is Christ. He needs to take action.

I am not suggesting that we ought, then, simply to back off and have no ideas or put forward no effort. Far from it! We are his body, we are his hands and feet and through us he does great things. We need to have the conversations in the voters meetings and the council meetings and the rest of the structures which make decisions in the parish. We need to volunteer and be a part of this, but we cannot lose sight of the fact that with Paul, we are but servants in this Church.

The gospel here is that Jesus is removing a great burden from our shoulders. He is taking the burden of success and ultimate responsibility from our shoulders. A trip across Europe will find one stumbling across countless churches which are in ruins. A typical city in the US contains many buildings which were erected in great hope by Christians of this or that congregation. Today they are used for something else. I once ate in a restaurant in Salt Lake City which had been a Lutheran Church. It was an odd and sad feeling realizing that folks had sat in there and had dreams for this place.

Jesus' church, however, goes on. Our particular parish is not the sum total of the kingdom of God. Jesus will give growth according to his plan and his good work, not mine and that is the really hard part. But when I finally can understand that, and live that, the reality is I can see that he has lifted a great burden from my shoulders. And freed of that burden, my life can be sweeter now, and my service to him can be all the more energetic.

Is the Church supposed to grow? Yes. Is my congregation supposed to grow? Is my congregation really the same thing as the Church? Or is it but one leaf on that mighty tree. It might fall to the ground, but the tree will remain, indeed the tree still grows. The success of the institution I call my congregation is not the same thing as the growth of the Christian Church.

We can sit here and diagnose this as a problem of parents who have done a bad job when our church doesn't grow. We can point to the fact that our music is not the right music. We can point to the poor parking at our building, but ultimately do we not simply assert our ownership when we do this? Christ will give the Church growth. Look at China where the Church grew under persecution and danger. Look at the early church. their parents were not bringing them to church.

3. Did I choose wrong? Is this why this is happening to me? (OT lesson – that God would console the hearer who struggles with guilt and consequences of past decisions. God loves them despite their decisions and he will help them through the consequences.)

This sermon is a more classic proclamation of hope and forgiveness. It is very easy for us to get into the nasty and recurrent habit of picking up our sins on the way out of church and bringing them home with us. One of the ways we do that is to start imagining that our lives are really a form of punishment on God's part. My poor choice, my sin, my indiscretion of years ago is coming back to haunt me. I know folks who have spent their whole lives tormenting themselves. Every set-back is God reminding them of their humility. The ding in the fender, the spot on the new coat, the investment gone bad, or even the death of a pet becomes just another reminder that we have disappointed God and he is making our life miserable somehow.

But this whole thing is built on a relationship which is not the one God established in Christ. It is really dredging up that old relationship which we would drown in baptism. God is concerned about our lives and how we live them, but he bears no grudges. He will not remove us from his Christmas card list because we mess up or offend him. He just doesn't play that game.

We are in the business of proclaiming the love of God that simply has no end. It is like a mighty waterfall that cannot be shut off. I can push against it, I can scream and shout, call it names, whatever I want, I will never stop God's love.

For the Christian this means we don't have to beat ourselves up about our sins. God has known about them for a very long time and loved us anyway. Yes, he gives us rules to live by and yes there are consequences for doing foolish things. But shutting off the valve on God's love is never one of those consequences. In truth, he will walk with us through the consequences, even the valley of the shadow of death. He will never leave us and his presence will never be anything other than his love.

4. My Decisions Count (OT – That the hearer would, as a redeemed child of God, embrace the calling which God has extended to them.)

Philippians 2:12-13, Ephesians 2:10, Romans 10:10 are all helpful here. We are wrestling with the content of Moses' appeal which sounds so "decision theology" to us, but in fact is addressed to God's covenantal people, people who are already saved. Their decision to follow, to do, to observe the covenant, etc., is important. We cannot deny the decision theology in a way in which we deny the decisions which baptized, regenerate people make. (see the discussion of the Formula of Concord under the OT reading above.)

This sermon wants to tell the hearers that their lives and the decisions which they make are in fact the very field in which God works today. He has joined himself to each one of us in Christ. That means my life is a place which is imbued with God; he is active within it. But the presence of God does not take away my choice, my participation. He is after just that, he doesn't desire to take it away.

Moses exhorts his people to make good decisions. They are the people of God already. This is not a decision to become God's follower, but this is the decision which the follower of God makes after baptism, after the Spirit has worked upon us.